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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 001600

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: PM SINIORA COMMENTS ON THE ELECTIONS,  
CANDIDATES, THE PATRIARCH, AND NASRALLAH

REF: BEIRUT 1575

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)  
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SUMMARY

1. (C) During a October 10 meeting with the Ambassador, Prime Minister Siniora expressed his dismay at some March 14 allies' willingness to give in so quickly to demands from the March 8 opposition that a consensus candidate for president be chosen. Siniora also stated his firm objection to a constitutional amendment that would allow LAF Commanding General Michel Sleiman to become President. Siniora said that the Patriarch is the ultimate king maker in terms of the presidency and, commenting on the recent speech given on October 5th by Hizbollah's SYG Hassan Nasrallah, said Nasrallah has "lost touch with reality." End Summary.

PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS AND CANDIDATES

2. (C) The Ambassador and Emboffs met with Prime Minister Siniora and his advisors Ambassador Mohammed Chatah and Roula Nouredine at the Grand Serail on October 10th. The often-dour Siniora was in a particularly jovial mood as the discussion moved through a long list of subjects. Siniora expressed his disappointment at some March 14 members' readiness to capitulate to opposition March 8 demands that there be a consensus president. Siniora believes that March 14 should not turn in its trump card so soon by taking the majority plus one quorum option off the table too early in the election process. However, Siniora added that the majority plus one quorum option should only be exercised after all other viable options have been exhausted by the majority coalition.

3. (C) Siniora then offered his analysis of some of the presidential candidates. In his view, Nassib Lahoud is the best choice, claiming that there was "an ocean" between Lahoud and the other candidates. Siniora believes that there still is a remote possibility that Michel Aoun would be president. According to Siniora, Aoun's supporters within the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) continue to believe that Aoun has a chance to be president. However, Siniora added, "maybe after Aoun realizes he can't win the presidency, he can find a role to play in the next government. He needs to find a good seat on the train". In regards to a consensus candidate, Siniora believes that all other options, such as

Robert Ghanem and Demianos Katter (the latter being an inexplicable favored choice of the Maronite Patriarch), would lead to a weak presidency and were unfeasible.

14. (C) Siniora and Chatah engaged in a debate amongst themselves over presidential powers. Siniora noted that the President still has the power to block the formation of a new government, further complicating the scenarios that could play out here in the coming months if a pro-Syrian presidential candidate is chosen. Chatah seemed unconvinced that this power was as critical as the PM suggested. When asked by the Ambassador whether or not there would be street confrontations over a vote based on a majority plus one quorum, Siniora replied that this was unlikely. Chatah added that the current rumors and threats were just political brinkmanship.

#### A NEW ROLE FOR GENERAL SLEIMAN

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5.(C) In a recent meeting with the Commander of the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), General Michel Sleiman, Siniora said that he had expressed his frank objection to a constitutional amendment that would enable General Sleiman to run for President. Siniora noted his deep respect and admiration for General Sleiman's role as head of the LAF, especially during the fighting at Nahr-al-Barid, but was firm in his objections to any changes to the constitution this time. Siniora believes that such a move would be like giving those who want to change the constitution a "blank check" to make amendments. Siniora believes that priority should be given to Lebanon's current problems, which are more important than a constitutional amendment to further Sleiman's political

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ambitions. However, the Prime Minister added that General Sleiman should be given a respectable position within the new government and be assured of an important role ahead of time. Siniora suggested that General Sleiman be reconfirmed as the head of the LAF, or perhaps even appointed Defense Minister in the new cabinet.

#### SAUDI PRESIDENTIAL PREFERENCES

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16. (C) Siniora also stated that during his recent meetings with Saudi government officials in Riyadh, they expressed their support for Nassib Lahoud's candidacy but "were not willing to go to war for Nassib Lahoud." The Saudi officials then informed Siniora that they would not support Michele Aoun if he were chosen to be president.

#### PATRIARCHAL POWERS

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17. (C) Siniora told the Ambassador and Embossos that the "coronation" of a new president will take place only if the Patriarch is on board. If the Patriarch doesn't support the new president, then the newly elected president, no matter who it is, will be powerless. Referring to the "half-plus-one" election option, Siniora noted that in his view, the Patriarch is the only person who can provide legitimacy. Chatah added that the Patriarch could symbolically excommunicate those Christians disobeying the Bishop's decree (by no longer receiving them for audiences) and Siniora agreed that something should be done to penalize those Christians refusing to heed his and the bishops' appeals. Siniora also believes that the Patriarch will try to put the blame on others if the majority plus one option is exercised. He expressed his disappointment with the Patriarch's unwillingness to take a more aggressive stand concerning Christian parliamentarians not exercising their duty to cast a vote in the presidential election process. Siniora said that the Patriarch had not been proactive enough and that "maybe he needs to be pampered." Siniora also announced that Lebanon's Sunni establishment was in the final

stages of issuing a statement highlighting the important connection that Lebanese Christians and Muslims have with one another.

HASSAN NASRALLAH SPEECH  
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17. (C) During the meeting, Siniora brought up the speech given on October 5th, Jerusalem Day, by Hizbollah,s SYG Hassan Nasrallah (reftel). Siniora highlighted factual discrepancies in Nasrallah,s speech concerning the Special Tribunal as well as references to past remarks supposedly made by Siniora suggesting that he did not support Lebanese citizens living in southern Lebanon and their right to return to their homes after they had evacuated during the war. Siniora commented that Nasrallah was a "liar, like a Mussolini." He shared a story told to him by an Egyptian acquaintance who said that on many days, the only person Nasrallah sees is the man who brings him coffee. Siniora said this was evidence Nasrallah has developed a "bunker mentality" and was beginning to lose his grip on reality. Chatah also suggested that Nasrallah,s claim that Israel was behind the assassinations of March 14 MPs and other anti-Syrian public figures will continue as a theme in his Hizbollah public remarks. Siniora, displaying some dark humor, said that "if Israel is responsible for the assassinations, then they are actually doing Nasrallah a favor" and questioned "if Israel is responsible for the assassinations, then why are Nasrallah and his Syrian allies so afraid of the Tribunal?"

SINIORA LETTER TO UN SYG MISUNDERSTOOD  
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18. (C) The Ambassador also asked Siniora about his recent letter to UN SYG Ban Ki Moon. The Ambassador highlighted that Siniora's supposed use of the term "genuine" to describe jihadists terrorists in Iraq unwittingly implied that their mission is justified and noble. This small phrase could be exploited by Siniora's opponents to suggest that Siniora supports terrorists. Siniora, shocked and clearly troubled by the insinuation, quickly referred to the original Arabic

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